



Quality not Quantity

Posted by [Pierluigi Oliverio](#) on Monday, September 08, 2008

City Hall Diary

San Jose's population has grown by leaps and bounds and the city has provided more housing—including both market rate and affordable housing—in Santa Clara County and the Bay Area than any other municipality. Once a city filled with orchards, San Jose is now a sprawling suburb and still growing. Although you may see open space in the city, much of it was zoned for housing 2-20 years ago and just hasn't been built on yet.

When it comes to San Jose being compensated for parks, there is a significant monetary difference between market rate and affordable housing. Currently, San Jose receives park fees when building market rate housing. This money can go to improving an existing park in the area of the new development, or it can purchase land close by (if there is any available to purchase), or the park fee could allow for a donation of land to be used for a new park or trail.

On the other hand, affordable housing is exempt from park fees. The thought behind the exemption was that the development could be "even more affordable." For several years, the Redevelopment Agency (RDA) came to the rescue and paid the park fees (\$43.4 million) on behalf of the affordable housing developers. However, that well ran dry September 2005.

The city of San Jose has a housing department funded mostly by the RDA and a small amount of federal money. Approximately 20% of the RDA budget *must* go to affordable housing according to state law. This year, the RDA will give the housing department \$38 million for affordable housing, compared to \$30 million in 2007. These RDA funds are then bonded out by the housing department to raise more funds.

The housing department has a \$9.7 million personnel budget to staff 83 people to provide funding and technical assistance for the construction of new affordable housing and home buyer assistance. Also, they provide direct and indirect assistance to the homeless and those at risk of homelessness, and services that secure housing and related services. Finally, they lobby for state and federal money and, alarming to me, they lobby the San Jose city planning department for land conversions from

industrial to affordable housing. Currently, the city will allow affordable housing on land that is zoned for industry or commercial (our tax base), but not market rate housing.

The housing department and affordable housing advocates are on a quest to build as many units possible in San Jose. The financial markets are in the dumps when it comes to financing market rate housing. This allows affordable housing to rise to the top because of its ability to move forward and be built today.

In my opinion, I believe affordable housing should pay park fees or preserve land on site of the development for a park. If the city continues to exempt affordable housing builders from park fees, then we will be creating problematic neighborhoods. For example, in my own district I have the Richmond/Menker neighborhood. This area is packed with apartments and no place for kids to play, so they play in the street. It is not just my district; District 1, off of Winchester, or District 10, off of Blossom Hill, and countless areas of greater downtown have too many people without enough open space.

We should fund park land acquisition out of the housing department budget and/or developers should pay the park fees. As a hypothetical example, let's say the council wants to approve 3,000 affordable units in a year with no land/money for parks. Then the City of San Jose should scale down to 2400 units that have parks—quality vs. quantity.

If San Jose is serious about providing good homes to folks who cannot afford market rate, then we should be building affordable communities that have a quality of life and are not just providing shelter. The race to sainthood for the city on how many affordable units can be built might have a nice PR ring, but I believe that without parks attached to these projects, neighborhoods will suffer.

Poor people need parks as well as market rate people. With new residents, our current parks will become overused. San Jose should focus on the quality of developments and their amenities instead of meeting some housing quota suggested by people who do not live in San Jose.

Do you think that affordable housing should be built on land that is zoned for commercial or industrial uses?

Do you think that the council should stop approving new affordable developments until we figure out a way to pay for parks?

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